The Race for Wake Island

by Major M.R. Pierce, US Army

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the US Pacific Fleet lay in ruins, and the Japanese were just beginning their dizzying string of victories. One bright spot in the chaos was the US Marines' dogged defense of Wake Island and its sister islets Wilkes and Peale. The islands, isolated strips of coral in the central Pacific 1,000 miles west of Pearl Harbor and 500 miles north of the Marshall Islands, sat astride east-west lines of communication for both the United States and Imperial Japan.

In 1935, PanAir requested permission to use Wake Island as a refueling stop for its Pacific Clipper air service. With an eye toward the future, PanAir began making Wake Island habitable, building a hotel and a seaplane ramp.[1]

In 1940, the first of 1,000 civilian contractors arrived to turn the island into a military-funded Naval Air Station. The contractors were to build a three-legged airstrip complete with hangars and maintenance facilities, dredge the lagoon to make it ready for a squadron of seaplanes and build barracks for the Marines who would occupy the island.

The Marines Set Up Shop

The first Marines to arrive on Wake Island in August 1941 found that the contractors had built a sprawling camp for themselves near the PanAir facility, but work on the air station consisted only of a few ammunition bunkers, one leg of the airfield and no barracks. The 1st Defense Battalion Marines quickly began preparing defenses, despite a lack of equipment.

On 6 December 1941, commander Major James Devereux called an alert to test the readiness of the defenses. The men had worked 12-hour days continuously since his arrival on 15 October. Pleased with the results, he gave his overworked command the next day off.

Following their day of rest the Wake Island force set about their usual duties on 8 December. Around 0730, commander Winfield S. Cunningham and Devereux were notified that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. The message warned that an attack on Wake Island could be imminent. Within 45 minutes defenses were manned and ready.

While PanAir personnel prepared to leave the island, the civilian contractors' foreman offered his men for the defense. He and Cunningham agreed that the best course of action would be for the civilians to continue work on the air station. Eventually, some of the civilians, many of them World War I veterans, fought admirably beside the Marines. Others faded into the jungle until the battle was over.

The Japanese Attack

Around noon, 27 Japanese land-based bombers attacked.[2] The defenders had little time to react. Eight planes were destroyed on the ground. The Japanese bombers then withdrew before the airborne patrol could intercept them. The air raids meant to destroy the island's defenses continued daily until 11 December.

Unknown to the defenders, a Japanese task force of three light cruisers, six destroyers, two transports that had been converted to destroyers, two regular transports and two submarines was on its way to the island.[3] Japanese planners felt that 450 soldiers of the Special Naval Landing Force, Japan's equivalent of the Marines, would be sufficient to seize Wake Island.

Lookouts on Wake Island spotted the ships approaching and alerted the command. The defenders held their fire to give the impression the air raids had destroyed the defenses. They hoped to lure the Japanese ships into range. For over an hour they were bombarded as the Japanese ships came closer. At 4,600 yards, the Marines' 5-inch batteries opened fire scoring several hits, including some on the Japanese flagship. Caught by surprise, the Japanese laid down a smoke screen as the force withdrew. The Marines sank one destroyer with all hands, and the remaining planes sank another.

The Japanese received their first defeat, and for the only time during the remainder of the war in the Pacific, their amphibious assault was repulsed. However, as the defenders cheered their success other wheels were in motion.

CINCPAC Shifts Sideways

As the Japanese Task Force limped away from Wake Island, the Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) staff was already planning to reinforce the island. The news of the Japanese defeat lifted the staff's spirits. The defenders had bought Admiral Husband E. Kimmel time to execute a full-scale relief and to strike back at the Japanese.[4]

Kimmel wanted to use the island as bait to lure the Japanese Navy into an ambush.[5] His plan was based on the US fleet's being intact and able to gain intelligence on the Japanese fleet's location.[6] Neither held true. Following the raid on Pearl Harbor, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral James R. Stark cabled Kimmel with the two options he saw for Wake Island: reinforce the defenders with Marines, aircraft and a radar set or evacuate all personnel after destroying the equipment. Stark left it to Kimmel's discretion to reinforce, resupply or evacuate both Wake Island and Midway.[7]

Kimmel's plan was to divide his carriers into three task forces. Task Force *8* formed around the USS *Enterprise* and was commanded by Admiral William Halsey. Vice Admiral Wilson Brown commanded Task Force *11* around the *Lexington*. Task Force *14*, commanded by Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, formed around the *Saratoga*. Each task force would have two to three cruisers and several destroyers.

These meager forces only highlighted the Pacific Fleet's crippled state. Task Force *8* would protect approaches to Oahu. Task Force *11* was to raid Jaluit and tie down Japanese forces. Task Force *14* was to move to a point off Wake Island where it could launch its planes.[8] Meanwhile, the *Tangier*, a converted seaplane tender, was to dash to the island, deliver reinforcements and evacuate civilians.

On 12 December, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox arrived on a fact-finding mission to gather information on the Pacific Fleet's status and affix blame for the Pearl Harbor fiasco.[9] Kimmel's staff briefed Knox on the relief operation, which he approved. However, his official report would have a serious impact on the upcoming battle.

An Attack to Save Face

The Japanese did not have to seize Wake Island. They could have written it off and starved out the garrison, but they wanted it for its strategic importance and to save face.

The Japanese augmented the next assault force with heavier cruisers and more destroyers. They increased the landing force from 450 to 1,000. As an indication of their determination, if things went badly, the destroyers would be beached, and the crews were to assist the assault.[10] The most telling stratagem was the detachment of two aircraft carriers, the *Hiryu* and the *Soryu*, from the withdrawing Pearl Harbor force to support the assault.

The Race is On

Kimmel's staff estimated it would take Task Force *14* six and one-half days to steam 2,000 miles to Wake Island.[11] What they failed to anticipate was the task force's need to refuel the smaller destroyers and zigzag as an antisubmarine measure.

On 15 December, Kimmel issued an operation order only seven pages long. The order was a clear, concise document whose only assumption was that Wake Island would not have fallen before Task Force *14* arrived. Missing from the order was guidance if the ships made contact with a Japanese force before reaching the island. Such guidance might have eliminated indecision later.

D-day for Wake Island's relief was 1030 23 December. The *Tangier*, with her load of supplies and eager Marines, left Pearl Harbor on 15 December to deliver supplies and aircraft to and evacuate wounded and a portion of the civilians from Wake Island. The *Saratoga* and her escorts left Pearl Harbor on the evening of 16 December. The next day she rendezvoused with her support ships, and Task Force *14* began its 12-knots-per-hour trek to Wake Island.

CINCPAC Blinks

The defenders on Wake Island had bought Kimmel time to strike at the enemy and salvage his reputation, but events in Washington were moving fast. Following his inspection, Knox reasoned that he had two conflicting demands. One was to strike at the enemy, which Kimmel's plan would accomplish. Second, there had to be an accounting for the Pearl Harbor debacle. He concluded that to protect the Roosevelt administration, Kimmel had to go. Knox knew that relieving Kimmel would jeopardize the Wake operation. Knox met immediately with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, presented his findings and shortly thereafter, Kimmel was relieved of command.[12]

Kimmel was devastated, personally and professionally. Personally it was an embarrassment. Professionally it said he had been found wanting at a time of crisis. But more important, Kimmel "did not want to be relieved in the middle of an operation he had set in motion."[13] As it turned out, if Kimmel had remained in command one more week the Battle of Wake Island might have ended differently.

Admiral Chester A. Nimitz, highly respected throughout the Navy, was to replace Kimmel. Admiral William Pye was to be the temporary CINC until Nimitz arrived. Pye was in an unenviable position. He had temporary responsibility for a crippled fleet engaged in a risky offensive operation—one he had not planned or whole-heartedly supported. It is understandable he doubted the wisdom of the Wake Island relief effort.[14] His own command rested on the bottom of Pearl Harbor; now he was responsible for what was left of the fleet. He did not want to be in the position of handing the incoming commander a list of new casualties if the Wake Island operation failed.[15]

The will to see Wake Island relieved was beginning to break down. Admiral Wilson E. Brown, commanding Task Force *11*, was also beginning to have grave concerns about the mission. And, on 17 December, CINCPAC received intelligence that Japanese Admiral Chuichi Nagumo was ordered to detach his carrier division to support the second attack on Wake Island.[16] A wave of doubt rushed through CINCPAC.

Pye's staff reassessed the situation and decided to continue operations. However, Pye's Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Milo F. Draemel, recommended that Task Force *11* be diverted to support Task Force *14*, thus concentrating two carriers in the area.[17] Pye concurred and ordered Brown to link up with Fletcher. However, to ensure the link-up, Pye ordered Fletcher to slow down to give Brown time to catch up.[18] In addition, Pye ordered Fletcher not to close within 200 miles of Wake Island.[19] This order suited both Fletcher and Brown. Brown could move ships away from the threat of land-based aviation, and Fletcher could refuel his force.

Support for the relief of Wake Island still appeared positive if not overwhelming. Pye dispatched a patrol plane to the island to tell Cunningham to prepare to receive reinforcements and to evacuate most of the civilians. Unfortunately, the plane's crew had broadcast hourly weather reports during their flight, which Japanese intelligence intercepted. Anticipating that Wake Island was to be reinforced, Nagumo

decided to attack earlier than planned.[20]

After returning to Pearl Harbor, the patrol plane's crew painted a desperate picture of the island's defense. Pye later recalled: "The situation at Wake seemed to warrant taking a greater chance . . . even at the . . . possible damage to major ships of Task Force *14*."[21] His was hindsight. During the crisis he did not seem willing to take a greater chance. However, he did free Fletcher from the 200-mile restriction and authorized the *Tangier* to make a high-speed run toward Wake Island.

The Japanese Invade

Hours after the patrol plane left Wake Island, the Japanese attacked. Another wave of doubt rippled through CINCPAC. Pye's concern was that he was now sending his ships into an ambush.[22] However, there had been no indications the Japanese were aware that Task Force *14* or any US force was in the area. It might still have been possible to make a fast run to Wake Island and catch the invasion force as it was unloading, which would take a large measure of boldness and risk.

On the morning of 22 December, Task Force *14* was 515 miles from Wake Island. Fletcher, assuming he could find himself in combat at some time the next day, decided it was time to refuel his destroyers. After 10 hours of frustrating, time-consuming effort, four destroyers were topped off. Fletcher called off the operation and decided to finish fueling later.[23] Some historians criticize Fletcher for the decision to stop to refuel. They feel that because his destroyers were one-half to three-quarters full, he should have cut loose the *Neches* and made a high-speed run to Wake Island.

Admirals are paid to be bold, but not rash, and Fletcher was not a rash man. He had weighed all the factors: he could be in combat the next day; his destroyers would burn fuel at a faster rate in combat; he was responsible for one of only three carriers in the Pacific; and the location and number of Japanese carriers was unknown. Fletcher made the more prudent decision based on the facts as he knew them.

The Japanese invasion force arrived at Wake around midnight of 22 December. As the invasion began, Cunningham tried to contact the submarines *Triton* and *Tambor*, which had been operating in the area, hoping to divert them to attack the assault force. He received a message from CINCPAC: "No friendly vessels should be in your immediate vicinity today. Keep me informed."[24] This was not a message to inspire confidence in a commander locked in a desperate fight.

After receiving word of the Japanese landing, Pye and his staff discussed the future of the relief attempt. The staff was divided between those who wanted to immediately withdraw Task Force *14* and those who urged Fletcher to increase speed and attack the Japanese.[25]

On 23 December, Fletcher's task force was 425 miles from Wake Island. It would take 12 hours for his force to reach the island, but there was a chance he could still catch the invasion force and inflict some damage.

Around 0600 Cunningham radioed: "Enemy on island. Issue in doubt."[26] This message seems to have taken some of the "offensive spirit" out of Pye. He countermanded his first order, telling Fletcher merely to attempt to evacuate the beleaguered island forces.

At 0652, Pye received Cunningham's final message: "Enemy on Island. Several ships plus transports moving in. Two DD [destroyers] aground."[27] The situation looked grim. Pye's three carrier task forces were operating independently. These carriers represented the Pacific Fleet's only offensive capability. Two Japanese carriers were in the area, and he had no knowledge of the others' locations. And, he was only temporarily in command; soon he would hand the fleet over to Admiral Chester Nimitz. Pye decided to recall Task Force *14*. It was surely as difficult and painful as the decisions Cunningham was making on Wake Island.

Around 0200 23 December, the final assault began. The defenders stubbornly fought back despite overwhelming odds. On Wilkes Island, the Americans had gone on the offensive and killed or captured every Japanese soldier. However, because of poor communications, neither Cunningham nor Devereux knew of this success. At 0700, after hours of desperate fighting, Cunningham authorized Devereux to surrender.

Post Mortem

Were the defenders abandoned to their fate? Or were they a tactical sacrifice to maintain the Pacific Fleet's strategic viability? Pye answers: "The use of offensive action to relieve Wake had been my intention and desire. But when the enemy had once landed on the island, the general strategic situation took precedence, and the conservation of our naval forces became the first consideration. I ordered the retirement with extreme regret."[28]

Could a situation such as Wake Island occur today? Most definitely. Small US detachments and units scattered about the globe participate in strategically vital operations in extremely hostile environments.

Current operations share another significant feature with Wake Island—the presence of civilians, usually volunteers serving with relief organizations. Many such organizations are international, which adds another layer to the problems that could face a modern-day Cunningham. Civilian presence will also influence the decisions of commanders on the ground. Twelve hundred unarmed civilians on Wake Island weighed heavily on Cunningham as he made the decision to surrender his command. A leader today would be no less cognizant of the presence of noncombatants. And, the press will always be there to remind us should we forget.

Probably the single most significant change from the actions and operations conducted in World War II is the advent of instantaneous news—now called the "CNN factor." How different might the decisions on Wake Island have been if a news crew had been there to photograph and catalog every aspect of the defense? How much of a liability would the island have been if Americans could have seen daily the defenders' heroism or, more poignantly, their pathetically weak defenses? It would

have been much harder to convince the American people that recalling the relief force was strategically sound. In the end, leaders will continue to make difficult strategic decisions based on the country's needs—not the number of civilians or the amount of news coverage.

Aftermath

After Cunningham surrendered, he donned his dress blues to meet his captors. To Devereux fell the humiliating task of going to each position telling the men to surrender. Some were incredulous. One of the Marines advised: "Don't surrender, [sir]. Marines never surrender. It's a hoax."[29]

The biggest surprise awaited Devereux when he went to Wilkes Island. The Marines had gained the initiative through luck, courage and resolute leadership. They had gone on the offensive and saved the island. As Devereux approached the island, he was surrounded by "a few grubby, dirty men who came out of the brush with their rifles ready."[30] Reluctantly, the men surrendered.

By 1400, all resistance ceased. Despite their surrender, Wake Island's defenders struck a moral and physical blow to Japan. While exact Japanese losses during the 15-day battle will never be known, over 1,000 soldiers died; four warships were sunk and eight were damaged; and 21 aircraft were shot down.

US losses were negligible: 58 Marines, 11 sailors and an undetermined number of civilians.[31] Equipment losses included 12 aircraft, six 5-inch coastal guns and twelve 3-inch antiaircraft guns. The psychological benefit cannot be quantified, but "Remember Wake Island" became the country's rallying cry.

The Japanese decided to keep 100 of the civilian contractors on the island to complete the airbase, which by 1943 became functional. When US Navy planes attacked the island, the Japanese commander believed the US was preparing to invade and executed the civilians. The US did not invade and the commander's action has never been explained. The US never returned to Wake Island. Ironically, for all its supposed prewar strategic importance, the island played no role in either side's strategy for the remainder of the war.

NOTES

1. Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 239.
2. James Devereux, *The Story of Wake Island* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1947), 50.
3. Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough, Major Verle E. Ludwig and Henry L. Shaw, *Pearl Harbor to Guadacanal: The History of the U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, 1 (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1965), 116.
4. Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton, Captain Roger Pineau and John Costello, "*And I was There*": *Pearl Harbor and Midway: Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 334.
5. Captain Edward L. Beach, *Scapegoats: A Defense of Husband E. Kimmel and Walter C. Short at Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 105.
6. In June 1942, Admiral Chester Nimitz used Midway in essentially the same way; the Japanese Navy lost four carriers.
7. Robert J. Cressman, *The Battle for Wake Island: A Magnificent Fight* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 152.
8. These would be F2A Brewster Buffaloes. VMF 211 and 221 were from the same Marine Air Group adding to the Marines' desire to help their friends.
9. Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 584.
10. Robert D. Heinl Jr., *The Defense of Wake* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), 37.
11. Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest: The Biography of Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 75.
12. Layton, Pineau and Costello, 330-33.
13. Cressman, 102.
14. Regan, 76.
15. Layton, Kimmel's and later Nimitz's intelligence officer, believed Pye's confidence and decisiveness was shaken by the Japanese attack.
16. Regan, 78.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Ibid.
19. Cressman, 183.
20. Cressman, 176.
21. Ibid., 190.
22. Layton, Pineau and Costello, 340-41.
23. Cressman, 189-90.
24. W. Scott Cunningham with Lydel Sims, *Wake Island Command* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961), 124.
25. Regan, 79.
26. Cunningham with Sims, 133-34. Cunningham states his message was not intended as bravado but was a phrase he recalled from a novel by Anatole France, *The Revolt of Angels* (originally published in 1914).
27. Cunningham.
28. Duane Schultz, *Wake Island: The Heroic, Gallant Fight* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 145.
29. Devereux, 195.
30. Ibid.
31. The number of civilian casualties has been placed at between 33 and 80.

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Military Learning

by Captain Eric Higenbotham, US Army National Guard

During World War II, US and British armored units fought against the same foe on the same ground using the same equipment. US effectiveness improved dramatically in three years of active operations. British effectiveness improved at a much slower rate during their five years of activity.

The difference in British and US rates of wartime learning apparently relate to organizational infrastructure and the systems by which information was absorbed and codified. British army learning was hampered by the lack of armywide doctrine and common tactical procedures and a decentralized command practice that delegated authority for much of the army's training, doctrine and organization to theater and unit commanders. In contrast, a dense network of channels allowed effective communication among officers within the entire US force, and common doctrine and training standards supplied the Army with the baseline or common language necessary to absorb new ideas and develop, test and implement new tactical protocols.

Combined Arms Warfare

In 1940, each of the primary combat arms enjoyed certain advantages over one or more of the others. For example, high-velocity antitank guns were capable of destroying tanks at 3,000 meters, approximately twice the range at which most tanks of the day could respond. However, antitank guns were highly vulnerable to artillery fire, which had a range of about 12,000 meters. In turn, artillery was vulnerable to tank attacks.

Of course, the actual dominance of one weapon system over another

depended on a host of factors, including terrain and unit mission. Therefore, the ability to deploy weapons quickly against the most appropriate targets, given their specific operational circumstances, determined tactical success.

The British Experience

In planning for Operation *Crusader* in 1941, British Eighth Army commander General Alan Cunningham intended to use mobile combined arms forces to sweep behind German forces entrenched in North Africa's "Sollum line." The bulk of British armor was deployed into the XXX Corps, which contained one infantry division and three tank brigades, each reinforced with infantry, artillery and antitank elements.

The XXX Corps was to slip around the German southern flank to Gabr Saleh, while British infantry divisions pinned down the German front. At or near Gabr Saleh, XXX Corps would defeat the German armor and, with its own flanks secured, crash down on the German rear.

After arriving behind German lines on 18 November, the anticipated German armored counterattack failed to materialize. The British XXX Corps became dispersed as its elements sought out the German armor. On 21 November, the two German panzer divisions converged on Sidi Rezegh, where the British 7th Brigade's tanks were deployed, destroying all but 28 of the British tanks. The next day, XXX Corps joined the battle, but the two remaining armored brigades arrived individually and were defeated in detail. By the evening of 22 November, only 44 operational tanks remained in XXX Corps.[1]

Throughout these and subsequent actions, British armor operated independently of infantry, antitank and artillery forces. Robert Crisp, tank troop commander, 3d Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, wrote a detailed narrative of the action in which he mentions the presence of artillery and antitank elements in the brigade, but he never discusses any action coordinated with them.[2] In a similarly detailed account, R.L. Crimp, a member of one of the British 7th Armoured Brigade's infantry battalions, also fails to mention significant coordination of the unit's actions with brigade tank elements.[3]

This lack of coordination had dire consequences. When British armor encountered German antitank defenses, especially when those were backed by artillery and armored reserves, local British armor commanders had no choice but to run or charge. Crisp writes: "A German 88-mm gun could knock us out at 3,000 yards, whereas the maximum effective range of our 37-mm and 2-pounder guns was reckoned to be about 1,200. The result, in simple arithmetic, was that we would have to be within range of their tanks and guns for 1,800 yards before we could hope to get close enough to do any damage. Eighteen hundred yards, in those circumstances, is a long way. It is sixty-four thousand eight hundred inches. . . . The only answer lay in mobility, and pretty fast mobility at that."[4]

Mobility was not the only answer. Even a contemporary 81-millimeter mortar out-ranged the flat-trajectory 88-millimeter gun by over two kilometers. But this solution would have entailed the coordination of more than one type of weapon. The British 22d Brigade lost 52 tanks while fighting the Italian Ariete Division.[5] But, while the British were impressed by the quality of German equipment, no one could argue that the Italians enjoyed any sort of materiel qualitative superiority.

Two years later, during Operation *Goodwood*, British armored divisions enjoyed only marginally better combined arms coordination. *Goodwood* was the first of two nearly simultaneous attacks—the other being Operation *Cobra*—designed to break out of the coastal area after the Normandy landings. The plan called for 2,000 heavy and medium bombers to hit various German-held targets. Tanks and other VIII Corps elements were to follow a rolling barrage fired by 500 guns, pass some small villages that dotted the area, then continue up the slopes of Bourguebus Ridge. Additional infantry forces, reinforced with armor, were to secure the flanks.

The plan failed, and poor combined arms coordination was largely to blame. The operation plan called for the 11th Armoured Division to bypass the village of Cagny and attack the ridge. Cagny had been bombed early in the morning, and only four German 88-millimeter antitank guns were functional. Had even a small force of infantry accompanied the British tanks, the town could have been taken. Instead, the division left behind a force of 16 tanks to screen the German position. As the morning progressed, German battle group commander Hans von Luck reorganized Cagny's defenses. Damaged tanks were recovered and put into line, and by noon, the Germans had eight functioning Mark IVs. Von Luck's gunners eventually destroyed all 16 tanks of the 11th Armoured Division's screening force.[6]

By 1100, British tanks were prepared to attack Cagny. However, the mechanized rifle battalion of the division's armored brigade was delayed. Until it arrived, all attempts to flank the German position and find a way into the town were repulsed. At 1600, the infantry battalion finally arrived, and "the village fell almost at once—because the Germans had no infantry either, only the guns and a single tank."[7] The action at Cagny cost the 11th Armoured Division about 20 tanks and the Guards Armoured Division over 60 of its number. Despite the victory, the battle cost the British precious time at a critical point in the battle.

Similar problems plagued the Bourguebus Ridge attack. When the 11th Armoured Division encountered massed artillery fire from behind the ridge and antitank fire from on top of it, the division's single battalion of organic self-propelled artillery proved woefully inadequate. With no infantry and no artillery, the tanks were once again forced to charge the guns. Author John Keegan quotes an officer with the 3d Royal Tank Regiment: "It was just as the leading tanks were level with Hurbert Folie when the fun began. I saw Sherman after Sherman go up in flames, and it

got to such a pitch that I thought that in another few minutes there would be nothing left of the regiment."[8] The British lost over 500 tanks—36 percent of the entire armored force—during the three days of Operation *Goodwood*.[9]

The US Experience

The goal of the German offensive around Kasserine Pass was to disrupt Allied preparations for the final push to Tunis. The attack threw US forces off balance. The lst Armored Division lost 100 tanks, 57 halftracks, 29 artillery pieces and 6,700 men, over half of whom were captured. Combat Command A (CCA) of the 1st Armored Division was deployed to defend the passes leading to Sidi Bou Zid, which sat astride the road to Kasserine Pass.

When the battle began, CCA elements were widely dispersed and only marginally task-organized. Brigadier General Raymond McQuillan had placed one infantry battalion on each of the two hills overlooking the road to Sidi Bou Zid. The two positions were too far separated to be mutually supporting, and they were too far from CCA's artillery elements to receive support from them. The reserve, a battalion of tanks and a company of tank destroyers, was located to the rear of Sidi Bou Zid from where it could theoretically launch counterattacks to support the forward-deployed infantry. However, since the front was wide open and the flanks unprotected, little prevented the Germans from penetrating the entire area, blocking the reserve and isolating each element.

On 14 February, the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions moved between and around the two US forward positions. By 0730, the Germans had completely surrounded the forward US infantry battalions. The German combined arms force of 83 tanks, supporting artillery and antitank weapons soundly defeated the single battalion of US tanks, then pressed on to Sidi Bou Zid.

In early 1943, most observers would have agreed that the US Army would never produce division- or corps-size units capable of coordinating large-scale, combined arms operations. British and French junior officers commonly called the Americans "our Italians," and British General Harold Alexander, arriving in North Africa during the Kasserine battle, said Americans were "ignorant, ill-trained and rather at a loss."[10] Over the next year and a half, the US Army improved dramatically. Operation *Cobra* showcased US Army capabilities far above those displayed in the battles for Tunisia.

Operation *Cobra,* launched seven days after Operation *Goodwood,* ruptured German lines. Facing a discontinuous defense organized around blocking positions and strong points, US forces attacked on parallel axes. Armor and infantry were cross-attached down to the platoon level, and the activities of tanks, infantry, engineers and artillery were highly coordinated. Where possible, infantry rode on top of tanks to keep up with and provide security for the armor.

While tanks attacked strong points, infantry leaders, through telephones rigged to the back deck of each tank, alerted tank commanders to unseen dangers. Artillery forward observers traveled on top of the lead tanks, taking advantage of mobility and added height to call in accurate and timely fire. When encountering resistance, tanks and self-propelled artillery laid down a base of fire, while infantry worked into assault positions. Engineers traveled with all of the columns and were deployed to demolish physical obstacles.[11]

As in most battles, the infantry took particularly heavy casualties. For example, CCA, the 2d Armored Division's leading task force, lost most of its infantry while attacking the town of Percy. Nevertheless, Percy was taken, and nowhere was progress blocked for the want of infantry or artillery. At one point, 2,500 Germans of the LXXXIV Corps tried to break out of the trap between Lenglonne and St. Denis. General Joe Collins wrote that "pointblank artillery and tank fire greatly aided the armored infantry in breaking up the attack. After six hours of confused fighting, illuminated by burning vehicles, the 2d Armored held fast."[12]

In contrast to the British and in spite of their prewar inexperience with armor, US soldiers learned quickly and developed highly effective armored divisions capable of conducting combined arms combat. Few Englishmen would call the Americans "our Italians" after 1943. Richard O'Connor, one of Britain's most gifted armor commanders during the war, wrote, "Having seen a good deal of them [Americans] recently, I think there is a lot to be learned from them."[13]

Theorists, Leaders and Cognitive Theory

It is easy now to find flaws or incongruities in individual British prewar theories of mechanized warfare. Nevertheless, what characterized that body of thought as a whole was its broad scope and general foresight. The ideas of J.F.C. Fuller and B.H. Liddell Hart provided inspiration for British armored advocates during the early interwar period. During the last year of World War I, Fuller developed "Plan 1919" that called for more than 5,000 tanks so "a carefully mounted tank, infantry and artillery attack could be launched, the objective of which [would be] the zone of the enemy's guns; namely the secondary tactical zone some 10,000 yards deep."[14] The war ended before the plan could be implemented, but Liddell Hart expanded on Fuller's ideas after the war, focusing much of his attention on how tactical success with mechanized units could be exploited to achieve decisive results at the operational and strategic levels.[15]

Liddell Hart was largely responsible for creating an experimental mechanized brigade in 1927, which gave a large number of later field commanders experience in armored warfare and provided a basis for continued discussion of mechanized warfare during the interwar period. A lively debate about the proper mix of

weapon systems in mechanized units ensued. Major General Sir Percy Hobart, commander of the 7th Armoured Division, believed that tanks could operate almost, although not entirely, independently on the battlefield.[16] Brigade Major Vivyan Pope, at the Tank Corps Center felt there was a need for balanced elements of tanks and armored infantry.[17] Despite varied opinions, combined arms coordination was clearly recognized as being necessary.

In the United States, little serious thought was given to mechanized units' organization, in part because the Army lacked armored vehicles or organizations with which to experiment. In Britain, armored units of one type or another were in continuous existence during the entire interwar period.[18] The first US experimental brigade was not created until 1928 and was disbanded within three months. The brigade's only tanks were derelict French and British models that had been pulled out of storage and put in running order. The entire budget for armored vehicles between 1925 and 1939 totaled $60,000, less than twice the projected cost of a single Christie tank in 1938.[19] On 1 September 1939, the United States had 28 operational tanks.[20]

US Army armor pioneers lacked budgets, equipment and organization. Most borrowed ideas from the British. General A.R. Chaffee Jr., the US Army's most prominent champion of armor, relied heavily on British reports for developing armor doctrine.[21] Much of the opposition to armor was as much bureaucratic as it was intellectual. Nevertheless, the result was a complete lack of discussion and debate among US military officers on mechanized combined arms warfare.

Bureaucratic Politics Theory

Theories about the effects of bureaucratic politics on organizations surmise that vested interests frequently interfere with the rational functioning of organizations. Hence, the relative effectiveness of different organizations would seem to depend in part on internal or external obstructions they face and the ways in which they cope with them. Was the British army more prone than the US Army to organizationally motivated obstructionism? A review of organizational politics in both forces reveals this was not the case.

Several students of World War II British operations have argued that while British theorists were ahead of their time, they were blocked from positions of responsibility by more conservative senior leaders who had risen from infantry and, particularly, cavalry commands.[22] Undoubtedly, conservative forces were operating in the British army. However, the force's decentralized structure was far more conducive to experimentation and the free competition of ideas than was the more rigidly structured US Army.

British army officers belonged to one of two branches—infantry or cavalry—or to one of several corps, such as artillery, tank, engineers or ordinance. However, the core element in an officer's identity and prospects for promotion was his regimental standing. The regimental system was originally intended to facilitate the maintenance of colonial forces overseas. Each regiment, most of which had two battalions, was responsible for maintaining one battalion overseas.[23] Officers stayed within a given regiment until graduating to commands above battalion. Their assignments thereafter periodically included rotations in regimental management. Hence, although battalions were formed into brigades and divisions where possible, affiliation was always primarily to the battalion and regiment.

While outwardly promoting conservative values—exemplified by the traditions of the British regimental officers mess, polo playing and so on—the system allowed new ideas to flourish under the cover and protection of many overlapping structures. Experimentation frequently took place at the regimental level, and many of the best ideas were adopted by the rest of the force. British infantry had been experimenting with machinegun and antitank carriers in the mid-1920s, and the artillery created the world's first self-propelled artillery piece—the 18-pound Birch Gun.[24]

Based largely on 1934 maneuvers, during which mechanized forces had performed extraordinarily well, Chief of the Imperial General Staff John Montgomery-Massingberd ordered the entire army—infantry, cavalry and artillery—to accelerate the process of mechanization. Twenty-eight infantry battalions would be converted to mechanized machinegun battalions; the remainder would become motorized.

Before the war, several advocates for armor, including Fuller, embraced armor's cause with near-messianic zeal. They felt that professional armor officers had been denied access to authority and that maneuvers had been skewed to reflect poorly on the Royal Tank Corps, although there was little evidence to substantiate either claim.

In 1927, Fuller was appointed as the first commander of the experimental mechanized force, but he rejected the offer on the grounds that he would also be required to command a nonexperimental brigade, which would compromise the experiment. The rest of the tank corps did not share his objections. They tended to view the command arrangements as adequate and the establishment of the mechanized force as a great opportunity.[25]

US Army armor advocates faced more bureaucratically motivated opposition to their ideas than did the British. US Army branches, particularly cavalry and infantry, tended to tightly control events. In 1930, Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur ordered both the infantry and cavalry to mechanize their units. Nether branch complied. Cavalry branch chief John Herr went so far as to say that he would not cut a single horseman to make room for tanks. In 1938, to underscore his position, he attempted to reintroduce the saber to the cavalry inventory.[26]

In this environment, US armor enthusiasts could find little "space" within which to operate or purvey their ideas. And, in fact, the tank

corps, which had been formed in 1918, was abolished by the 1920 *National Defense Act*.[27] Despite the general advantages of clip-fed rifles over horses, cavalry officers came to dominate the US Army, providing a particularly large obstacle to the encroachment of armor.[28] The net effect of bureaucratic obstruction in the US Army was a lack of discussion about how combined arms tactics might be employed most effectively within mechanized forces. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, no US Army units had trained for such operations.

Although there were undoubtedly active opponents of mechanization in the British army, they met with far less success than did US military conservatives. However, while there might be some validity to the argument that bureaucratic politics hurt the British army's performance, it cannot explain the US Army's better wartime learning curve.

Continuous Improvement

The era of regular and planned innovation in industry has given rise to a relatively new body of literature on organizational learning and effectiveness. The common element in this literature is the focus on continuous process improvement—or dynamic learning—and the treatment of the organizational infrastructure as the primary determinant of competitiveness and effectiveness.

The British army had immense difficulties moving from conceptions and theories of armored warfare toward an armored warfare doctrine. It had even more difficulties converting doctrine into tactical procedures. In 1938, the *Field Service Regulation* was the only official armywide operational guide not associated with a branch or regiment.[29] However, its contents were largely abstract rather than procedural. During the war, the notes from the theater of war provided more concrete assistance.[30] But, the notes, written as communiqués by regional commands, provided no armywide standard that could serve as a basis for incremental improvements.

Behind this lack of armywide tactical procedures and standards was the British army's regimental system and decentralized nature. Of all the European powers, only the British assigned so many training responsibilities to the regiments and so few to the war department or army headquarters. The concentration of resources at the regiment level inhibited training at brigade and division levels. Responsibility for large-scale exercises was placed primarily on the major home and overseas commands, and no army-level exercise facilities were funded and equipped to routinely cope with such events. Exercises conducted on the Salisbury Plain—a tiny plot of land by US standards—were as close as the British came to a center for army tactics. But those exercises were held under the Home Command's auspices, which did not have the authority to establish tactical procedures for the entire force.

The British army's decentralized nature hampered the development of armywide tactical procedures and plagued the development of coherent fighting units. For example, the 7th Armoured Division—the "Desert Rats"—involved both in Operations *Crusader* and *Goodwood*, spent a total of two weeks during the war training as a single body, despite numerous breaks in its battlefield activity.[31] Even after the fall of Tunis, when the division was sent to Homs for four months, no division- or brigade-level exercises were held. Generally, when the division was out of line, battalions were dispersed, each going to its own camp or regimental depot. In April 1941, when the division was sent to refit in Egypt, the 2d Rifle Battalion was stationed on the Suez Canal to watch for air-dropped mines, while the armored battalions were camped in the delta.[32]

Of course, battle can be considered a form of training. Armies are frequently described as "battle hardened," a phrase that suggests combat seasoning. But the British experience suggests that combat experience might not result in significantly improved operational capabilities if combat lessons are not systematically distilled and used as the basis for improved training. In June 1944, there were high expectations for what the Desert Rats might achieve in Europe, but their performance was worse than that of most other British armored units.[33]

Among other problems the 7th Armoured Division experienced was a lack of continuity in subordinate-unit composition. The regimental system was again largely to blame. The regiments protected their own turf, creating something of a union system. For example, the Royal Horse Artillery Regiment was responsible for providing the army with self-propelled artillery battalions. It protected this function, and other regiments, such as the Honourable and Ancient Artillery, could not be converted. As a result of this union system, any change in division tables of organization and equipment resulted in wholesale replacement of battalions instead of the conversion of battalions already assigned to the divisions.

Continuity also suffered when the regiments rotated battalions between the Home Command and various field commands. During the war, the number of battalions in the 7th Armoured Division went from 12 to 21 back down to 12. Eleven distinct brigades and 42 different battalions passed through the division as organic elements.[34] The resulting lack of division cohesion frequently resulted in scattered battalions during active operations. In emergencies, it was often easier to create scratch brigades out of battalions from different divisions than to reassemble the original divisions.

Frequent leadership changes above, below and at the division level further undermined unit cohesion and the ability of units and their leaders to learn together. During five-and-a-half years of war, the 7th Armoured Division had 10 commanders.[35] The situation at theater level was hardly better. British Middle East forces had three commanders in three years. Theater commanders

had great latitude in structuring or restructuring their forces. Perhaps more important, the lack of armywide doctrine standards meant each commander was likely to arrive in theater or at division-level headquarters with a radically different operational style than that of his predecessor. General Sir Archibald Wavell resurrected the 19th-century British light mobile desert column and conducted converging attacks with independently operating, corps-size, all-arms units. Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck favored bold sweeping attacks by massed armored forces. Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery preferred to lay siege to enemy front lines, frequently saying he was "crumbling" the enemy front. For the 7th Armoured Division, like all divisions in the British army, frequent changes in command meant frequently learning a new way of war.

The US Army, building on an existing training and doctrine system, developed an elaborate infrastructure that permitted the development, codification and continual evaluation of new doctrine and tactics. The outstanding feature of the US system was its treatment of both unit training and the development of tactics and doctrine as inseparable elements. This seamless system contributed directly and indirectly to US military performance. The US training system produced units that were well versed in existing doctrine and capable of performing to known and relatively uniform standards. The existence of a uniform standard facilitated the further development and improvement of tactics and procedures by ensuring that lessons learned from one unit were likely to apply to other units as well.

Virtually all of the training and doctrine system elements had some precedent, but General Lesley McNair formalized the full wartime system by using a program to develop, disseminate, test and modify US Army doctrine. The first part of this program involved conducting and evaluating maneuvers. Large-scale, relatively adhoc exercises were conducted. VIII Corps, formed in January 1941, conducted two corps-level exercises and participated in one multiarmy-level exercise within the first nine months of its existence. The second exercise involved close to 500,000 men and 1,000 aircraft operating across a "battlefield" that stretched along the Louisiana-Texas border.[36] Key participants studied exercise results in detail and prepared reports for McNair and his staff. The process helped the army community identify which tactics worked and which did not. The Desert Training Center, for a time under the direction of General George S. Patton Jr., was established for the continued refinement of tactical and operational procedures.[37]

The second part of the McNair's program involved inspection tours by key staff members from the various branches to units at the front. In addition to ensuring that doctrine was being followed at the front, specialists evaluated the effectiveness of existing doctrine and collected feedback from practitioners about how it might be improved. The reports "helped to link together divisions fighting overseas with the War Department, the army's school system and units training for overseas deployment."[38] The third part of McNair's program was a series of lectures, discussions and demonstrations designed primarily to explain the full range of unit types and capabilities.

A key precondition for doctrinal evolution was the rigorous training and testing of units at all levels in the procedures associated with existing doctrine. Under McNair's system, all new divisions entered a "training cycle" of 44 weeks before combat deployment.[39] The cycle was divided into three phases, each culminating in a rigorous evaluation of proficiency at platoon, battalion and division levels. Even after deployment, operational standards required that, when possible, a division's training cycle replicate in miniature the division's original training schedule. For example, after its drubbing at Kasserine Pass and the subsequent fall of Tunis, the 1st Armored Division settled in for a summer of training. While the British 7th Armoured Division rested and refitted at Homs in regimental cantonments, the US 1st Armored Division conducted "large-scale, day-night exercises" near Oran.[40]

In the US Army, channels of communication were redundant, sophisticated and frequently exercised. In the British army, channels were diffuse, informal and did not facilitate the systematic, armywide development and testing of tactical procedures. Neither British units nor British commanders could make the kinds of steady incremental improvements that characterized tactical adaptation and learning in the US Army.

A hands-on, interactive approach to learning, including the use of carefully constructed and systematically evaluated maneuvers, is necessary to convert theories of war into practical doctrines and procedures for the conduct of war. Theories of war establish the logical connections between technological and social developments and military possibilities. But military theories alone cannot deliver victory on the battlefield. The British were rich in theory but poor in practice. To have an impact on the battlefield, theories must be translated into doctrine or sets of procedures for accomplishing specific battlefield tasks. Effective doctrine can only be developed through the practice and evaluation of proposed procedures under simulated battlefield conditions.

Innovation and learning can be described in terms of continuous process improvement. The primary determinant of success or failure in achieving such continuous improvement is the strength of the infrastructure that binds the organization. A highly developed infrastructure is essential. For an organization to learn, its members must share a common language that derived from doctrine that is practiced throughout the force. Rigorous unit-level training

and evaluation produces leaders of high and, perhaps more important, relatively uniform quality. Based on these observations derived from the British and US armies in World War II, priority should be given first to the learning system itself, and only then to specific questions of doctrine, organization and equipment. ***MR***

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MR Review Essay

Stalin's Dangerous Game

by Bruce W. Menning

At 0330 on 22 June 1941, world war came to Russia for the second time in the 20th century. Three decades earlier, Czar Nicholas II's armies had gone forewarned into the offensive. This time Stalin's armies were caught by surprise and on the defensive.

Soviet troops on the frontier were at little more than peacetime strength. With timing and experience on their side, three German army groups tore their way with stunning rapidity through Russian air and ground defenses. In little more than a week, the *Wehrmacht*'s momentum carried the banners of fascism deep into Soviet territory. By 3 July, even Chief of the German General Staff General Franz Halder, initially skeptical, wrote that the Russian Campaign had been won in only two weeks. Until the Battle for Moscow six months later, the fate of Josef Stalin's Russia hung by the slender threads of frantic improvisation, untold sacrifice and desperate, defensive battle.

Why So Unprepared?

Why was the Red Army so unprepared for Hitler's invasion? Some blame failure on the historical "malady"—Russia's curse to do poorly at the outset of all conflicts. Others blame native military incompetence magnified by German perfidy and martial skill. Still others blame Stalin's inept statecraft and his naivete for trusting Adolf Hitler while distrusting his own intelligence reports about war's imminence, which originated with the very security and intelligence organs he had recently and ruthlessly purged. Also, when war did come, the burden of troop leadership fell on the shoulders of an officer corps seriously impaired by the same purges. It was as if Stalin were out to prove the adage that "most wounds are self-inflicted."

Subsequently, and not surprisingly, during Stalin's own lifetime, the initial period of the "Great Patriotic War" (the Russian term for World War II on the Eastern Front) was a black hole from which little historical light radiated. The post-Stalin period gave rise to occasional glimmers, but regard for the communist legacy and the reputations of Stalin's inheritors, who owed their rise and careers to preparation for and conduct of the war, precluded

more than a few stray flickers of light.

After 1956, Stalin gradually emerged as scapegoat, but criticisms were often elliptical and superficial. To transcend formulaic indictments associated with "the cult of personality," one had either to read—mostly in vain—between the lines or turn to the best western commentators, especially the dense, magisterial writings of British historian John Erickson.[1] Failing everything else, one could turn with less assurance to German writings of "the devil's disciples" for partisan explanations of why Hitler's generals initially did so well in order, ultimately, to fail so spectacularly.

These circumstances held true until the last years of Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev's regime, when "openness" and a thirst for "filling in the blank spots" created a more positive atmosphere for pursuit of historical truth, including what occurred in 1941. For a brief period during the early 1990s, a few daring pioneers, such as Colonel General Dmitri Volkogonov, succeeded in prying open archival doors, only to have them slammed shut by the forces of political uncertainty and resurgent conservatism. Meanwhile, the darkness was lit by a few feeble rays emanating intermittently from the Kremlin's Presidential Archive and various military archives.

By Dim Candle Light

By this time Viktor Suvorov and Gabriel Gorodetsky had already begun lighting a few candles of their own. Suvorov is the pseudonym of the well-known Soviet defector Miron Rezun, who "earned his spurs" in the West as a former insider writing about the inner workings of the Soviet Army. As the Cold War waned, Suvorov shifted his literary barrage from present dying enemies to past dead enemies, finally zeroing in on Stalin's role in allegedly precipitating Hitler's invasion of Russia.

In his book, *Ice-breaker: Who Started the Second World War*, Suvorov argues—on scant evidence—that in 1941 Stalin was actually preparing a preemptive strike against Germany.[2] Consequently, Germany's Operation *Barbarossa* could be justified as merely a preemption of the potential preemptor. In Suvorov's altered perspective, Hitler's turn to the east might be viewed as a preventive war—an anti-Bolshevik crusade that would presage the subsequent Cold War's containment and roll-back policies.

In one deft move, Suvorov flung open the door to the pure light of ideologically inspired speculation. Those who for any reason—and the reasons were often real enough—found something to dislike in the old Soviet regime basked in the bright light of a seemingly higher truth. Never mind that the preemption argument was as old as Hermann Goebbels' German propaganda machine, and never mind that it stretched the facts beyond any correspondence with historical reality.

Suvorov's work won an immense and sympathetic audience of a people long fed up with authoritarianism who were willing to believe the worst about their political forbears, especially Stalin. Russian authorities soon found themselves grudgingly reopening selected archives to revisit 1941 and counter Suvorov's bold run to daylight. Wittingly or unwittingly, he performed his most important service for historiography by prompting a limited reopening of Russian archives.

One of the scholars who benefited immensely from newly accessible materials is Israeli historian Gabriel Gorodetsky, Director of the Curiel Center for International Affairs at Tel Aviv University. Trained as a Russian diplomatic historian, Gorodetsky was deeply troubled by the widespread acceptance of Suvorov's contentions. From the mid- to late-1980s, he began a personal quest to set the record straight. Gorodetsky's book, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, is the product of painstaking archival research in Russia and elsewhere.[3] Not since the publication of John Erickson's books has any single work done so much to improve understanding of what went wrong for the Soviets in 1941.[4]

Stalin's Role

Gorodetsky marshals new materials and fresh perspective in his quest to clarify Stalin's actions during the year before Hitler's invasion. The portrait that emerges is more complex and nuanced than previous studies paint. It depicts a coldly calculating Stalin, who, when confronted with the revolutionary implications inherent in Hitler's version of a new European order, felt impelled by traditional Russian interests to redress the imbalance and address the international humiliations Russia had suffered since the end of the Crimean War in 1856. These interests, when translated into objectives, included acquiring a buffer zone for the western frontier, pursuing guarantees against possible incursion, expanding influence in the Balkans and retaining access to the Turkish straits, while denying the latter to potential adversaries.

In Gorodetsky's view, Stalin was neither the ideologue Suvorov depicts nor the ham-handed bungler British Prime Minister Winston Churchill remembered. Gorodetsky sees him as a single-minded practitioner of *realpolitik*. Of course, the difficulty was that Stalin's various ventures brought him into conflict not only with Germany but also with Great Britain, whose interests in the Mediterranean had long barred the door to Russian and Soviet expansion.

Distrust of Great Britain complicated Soviet foreign and security policy and initially prevented Stalin from finding common cause with the British against Hitler. Gorodetsky ably and even brilliantly demonstrates how, through everything, Stalin's policies looked not only to the west and sometimes to the east, but also to the southwest and the straits.

This complex mosaic depicts Stalin's reincarnated version of the "Great Game," the term usually applied to the 19th-century Anglo-Russian rivalry for hegemony in central and south Asia. Stalin's cards were chiefly political and diplomatic. He played them ruthlessly and with

some skill, as demonstrated by his nonaggression pact with Hitler; the outcome of the Finnish war; and the annexation of eastern Poland, the Baltic republics and Bessarabia. Yet Stalin's play also uncovered his weak suit, the Red Army, which left the Soviet Union vulnerable to military trump.

Gorodetsky is at his best as he weaves his way through the tangle of Balkan politics and perceptions. After failing to keep the Germans out of Romania, Stalin played for time and influence in Bulgaria only to have the Germans execute an end run into Greece, which naturally led to Bulgaria's capitulation to the Axis.

Bit Players

From these and other complex cross currents flow both a sense of the rational and traditional in Stalin's policy and an understanding of various participants, including ministers, ambassadors, soldiers, intelligence operatives and the occasional bit player. Thus, in the days before instantaneous communications, Gorodetsky shows how the British emissary to Moscow, the former leftist Sir Stafford Cripps, and his old-school German counterpart, Count Werner von Schulenburg, left their own imprint on the period's policies and perceptions. Both were prophets, but only one was ordained to play Cassandra.

Cripps believed Stalin was indispensable to any full-blown anti-Hitler crusade that might enable Great Britain to survive epic conflict. Schulenburg felt Germany had little to gain and much to lose from war with the Soviet Union. Gorodetsky also demonstrates how Stalin and his inner circle reacted to intelligence reports. They were men whose innate suspicions made them distrust not only the British—who were trying to drag the Soviet Union into the war—but also the often inexperienced and sometimes inept operatives plying their dangerous trade in occupied and unoccupied Europe. Indeed, the review of intelligence at Stalin's and the Soviet High Command's disposal is more detailed and comprehensive than that offered by any account available to date.

Varying conclusions drawn from intelligence sources highlight differences between Stalin and his military officers. Gorodetsky scores a major contribution in describing this relationship. After the Red Army's initial failures in Finland, and after shortcomings displayed in occupying newly annexed territories, Stalin treated even his best generals with a mixture of contempt, suspicion and distrust.

In a country where it was axiomatic that "the Party and Army were one," Stalin presided over—even ordained—a civil-military split at the upper reaches of his political-military establishment. Fear, and the occasional execution, sapped the high command's confidence and stifled initiative. Worse, Stalin never made the high command privy to his game, although the defense commissariat and the general staff were regular recipients of reports from military intelligence that reflected increasingly ominous *Wehrmacht* deployments opposite the Soviet frontier. Consequently, except for Stalin's occasional direct intervention, the high command was ignorant of the larger policy picture. They were condemned to formulate their plans in dangerous semi-isolation from Stalin's inner circle.

A Desperate Game

During the first half of 1941, Defense Commissar Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko and General Staff Chief Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov grew increasingly apprehensive over the German military threat. They proposed—sometimes timidly, sometimes boldly—various measures to enhance Soviet defenses. Stalin rejected the strongest of these measures, which included a plan for preemptive war although he did permit a partial covert troop mobilization during spring 1941. This mobilization eventually raised Red Army manning to about two-thirds of its wartime level—strategic depth that caught Hitler's generals by surprise. They had expected to break into the clear after the first few weeks of conflict.

Stalin would go no further. He understood the weakness of his military and resolutely avoided the slightest provocation to the Germans. As intelligence indicators of impending war became clearer, Timoshenko and Zhukov proposed additional measures that would raise frontier defenses to full readiness and permit forward commanders greater latitude in implementing and devising additional defensive measures. Stalin emphatically rejected these initiatives, silencing and humiliating Zhukov, simply bludgeoning Timoshenko and leaving the Red Army unprepared for an invasion.

By opting for a partial defense in depth, but not permitting readiness higher levels within forward defensive elements, Stalin burdened his commanders with an unresolvable dilemma. Their defensive deployments conferred a measure of deep insurance but left forward defenses utterly vulnerable. Meanwhile, even after Yugoslavia's catastrophic fall, Stalin relied increasingly on diplomacy as his primary instrument for averting war.

Gorodetsky portrays Stalin as a rational actor playing an increasingly desperate game, knowing full well that the Red Army was not his strong suit, but nonetheless skillfully playing the remainder of his cards to buy time, protect Russia's interests and possibly fashion a stronger position. The issue was whether the game would run long enough to change the fundamental calculus or generate other factors, such as a stronger Soviet military that might challenge Hitler's dominant position. Unfortunately, on 22 June, the game was up. Hitler unleashed the *Wehrmacht* to trump all bids.

A Tale Well Told

Gorodetsky persuasively relates all these developments, skillfully drawing together the diverse diplomatic, military and political threads of a complex narrative, all the while making extensive use of rare and previously unavailable archival materials. If, in the midst of this splendid achievement, it is possible to quibble over varying emphases and perspectives, then Gorodetsky's analysis suggests several areas worthy of further examination.

One such area derives from Gorodetsky's fixation on events in the

Balkans, which is at first a strength, but which gradually eclipses a fuller understanding of strategic developments on the increasingly important central, or east-west, axis. Once the Germans began to concentrate main forces in occupied Poland, the Balkan direction gradually lost importance.

As the situation on the western frontier grew increasingly critical, Stalin personally intervened in the military planning process to strengthen defensive dispositions within the Kiev Special Military District. Early on, as Gorodetsky asserts, he might have done this to retain the possibility of invading Romania, but by late 1940 the primary intent was to protect the breadbasket of the Ukraine and the routes to the Caucasian oil fields. The latter point Gorodetsky also concedes, along with the correct assertion that Stalin's intent was also to provide a springboard for a potential Soviet counteroffensive into the Polish plain once any initial German incursion had lost momentum. However, Gorodetsky clings too long to the possibility of an anti-Romanian mission for Kiev forces. By 1941, the opportunities were too fleeting and other threats too great.

Persistent fixation on the Balkan axis obscures what had become, by the late 1930s, a fundamental tenet of Soviet military strategy. Stalin's theoretical understanding of possible future war owed much of its sophistication to the assertions and writings of Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov, the first Chief of the Soviet General Staff. It was Shaposhnikov's conviction that any major conflict between bolshevism and fascism would likely become systemic and protracted. If this were the case, then the logical conclusion for Stalin was that the only way Hitler could win such a war would be first to gain control of Soviet grain and oil-producing regions, then proceed with a full-blown assault on Moscow in the center. Consequently, Stalin's emphasis on strengthening defenses in Ukraine was eminently sensible, an understanding that reinforces Gorodetsky's assertions about Stalin as a rational actor, but a strategic understanding that Gorodetsky never makes clear.

The irony inherent in Stalin's Ukrainian emphasis was the mistaken assumption that his adversary possessed the same degree of rationality. The immediate military reality was that the emphasis on Kiev left the Red Army—on the eve of war—at a distinct disadvantage along the axis north of the Pripet Marshes. This became the very sector of the main effort for Hitler's Army Group Center.

Another issue Gorodetsky does not press home is Stalin's perspective on what circumstances he might confront should war actually break out. In retrospect, the Finnish war seems to have instilled in him a sense of the steep political costs exacted against an aggressor. Suvorov's arguments notwithstanding, Stalin repeatedly and emphatically discarded the notion of preemptive war, no matter what his generals proposed. In retrospect, it is clear that Stalin had read Shaposhnikov's book, *The Brain of the Army*, which depicts the growing powerlessness of Nicholas II in 1914 as last-minute peacemaking efforts lost ground to the iron military laws of mobilization and transit timetables and troop-deployment schedules.[5]

Shaposhnikov studied the process and concluded that preparation for and conduct of future war should lie primarily in the province of "an integrated great captain," the chief of a modern general staff. While this conclusion was probably true, Stalin put his own spin on it by demonstrating that the dictator himself intended to act as Russia's version of this august personage. Ever the astute observer and Machiavellian practitioner of power politics, Stalin refused to cede requisite authority to the military, electing instead to retain complete control of the entire political-military flow to possible war.

Gorodetsky makes it clear that Stalin apparently never believed the situation would come to war. What is less evident is that Stalin—again the rationalist—felt he understood Hitler's road map to war. He foresaw a period of escalating tensions and political conflict followed by threatening military deployments and posturing after which a deal could be struck at the last possible moment. Indeed, a recently published addendum to Zhukov's memoirs asserts that as late as the fall of 1941 Stalin still expected to find accommodation with Hitler.[6] And, if Stalin's great game failed, the strategic-operational war game of January 1941 had demonstrated that the Red Army could withstand—although with considerable losses—an initial German offensive, then deliver a suitable riposte. Under these circumstances it is probably no exaggeration of the historical record to conclude that Stalin might rationally have elected to receive the first blow, in which case Suvorov's argument is completely eviscerated.

Whatever the actual complexities, it is worth noting that one week after the Nazi invasion, Stalin was leaving the halls of the Defense Commissariat in the company of his usual confidants. Clearly showing signs of strain, the dictator loudly blurted out to no one in particular that Lenin's heirs had squandered a great inheritance.[7] More accurately, by summer 1941, the national calamity was owed to Stalin's own dangerous game. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Among others, John Erickson's publications include *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983); *The Soviet Military, Soviet Policy and Soviet Politics* (Washington, DC: US Strategic Institute, 1973); *Soviet Military Power and Performance* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979).
2. Viktor Suvorov (Miron Rezun), *Ice-breaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990).
3. Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
4. Erickson.
5. Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov, *Mozg armii* [*The Brain of the Army*] (no publication information available).
6. Georgi K. Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971).
7. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

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